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## EXPLORATIONS OF THE ESOTERIC DREAMS OF THE HIMALAYAS<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction:

#### Sacred Topography and Orientational Metaphors

The study of the relations between physical aspects of the environment, such as landscape, and religious beliefs or concrete forms of mythology, have a long history in ethnology, cultural anthropology and religious studies. Both in the great monotheistic religions and in the local belief-systems of small tribes we can find many examples of a connection between the mountains and the sphere of sacrum. These can be seen in the area of the experience of sacrum (for instance, in the story of the origins of the Decalogue<sup>2</sup>) as well as in the material realm (sacred mountains, temples built on high peaks). Furthermore, mountains provided a fascination for various traditions of mys-



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<sup>2</sup> See *Book of Exodus*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of the *Torah* and of the *Old Testament*, chap. 19–24.

tery, and mountain expeditions were not infrequently parts of initiation rituals.<sup>3</sup> The very experience of climbing and ascending was often employed as a metaphor of the road to enlightenment.

The concrete realizations of these motifs, embedded in particular historical and socio-cultural contexts, have been analyzed in the perspective of sacred topography.<sup>4</sup> In the early stages of the development of modern religious studies (especially within the Eranos group<sup>5</sup> whose history, incidentally, was also connected to a mountain<sup>6</sup>), at a time dominated by myth and collective consciousness,<sup>7</sup> the role of mountains in religious visions was seen most often as that of a vertical axis mundi, and the point of contact between heaven and earth.<sup>8</sup> For C.G. Jung (1875–1961), objects like sacred mountains were to be found in the collective or objective consciousness, defined as a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind.<sup>9</sup>

When in 1980, George Lakoff and Marc Johnson published their famous book *Metaphors we live by*,<sup>10</sup> a work which

<sup>3</sup> Cf. initiation rituals in Xhosa and Sotho cultures in South Africa among others.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. chapter *Sacred Topography* [in:] J.W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002; *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites: Religion, Politics, and Conflict Resolution*, eds. E. Barkan, K. Barkey, Columbia University Press, New York 2014; Ch. Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Past: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

<sup>5</sup> H.T. Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London–New York 2014.

<sup>6</sup> M. Green, *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins. Ascona, 1900–1920*, University Press of New England, London 1986.

<sup>7</sup> See C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Princeton University Press, London 1991.

<sup>8</sup> M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991, pp. 37–54.

<sup>9</sup> *Psychological Insight into the Bible: Texts and Readings*, eds. W.G. Rollins, D.A. Kille, Grand Rapids 2007, p. 44; cf. C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Princeton 1953–1978, Vol. 20, par. 125, 135. The motif of a sacred mountain was extensively explored in the Eranos, and mentioned in works by many of its other members, e.g. H. Corbin, see P. Davies, *Romanticism & Esoteric Tradition: Studies in Imagination*, Lindisfarne Books, Hudson, NY 1998, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago 2003 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1980).

transformed the discipline of linguistics (giving impulse to various later theories of metaphor), it also had – and still has – a large influence on the study of religions. It also offers a new perspective on the motif of “sacred mountain”, on which we are focusing here. The system of concepts, which we normally use in our thought and action, is in its essence metaphorical. The source of these metaphors lies very often in the experience of embodiment and everything that follows from it. When talking about the sacralization of mountains, we are interested in metaphors of a structural<sup>11</sup> or ontological<sup>12</sup> character, but most importantly with metaphors related to spatial orientation:<sup>13</sup> up-down, front-back. An example from Lakoff and Johnson’s book is the association “happy is up”. Such metaphorical connections are not arbitrary, but based in our physical and cultural experiences. The direction up and above is associated with concepts such as happiness, awareness, health and life, domination, high status, righteousness, goodness and rationality.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that even in very different cultures, the realms of the divine are most often associated with what is above – mountains, stars, heavens.

As we suggested above, referring to various methodological approaches, it is difficult to imagine an entity which has inspired spiritual imagination more than the highest mountains of the world – the Himalayas, the mountains of Himavat. In the present paper we will discuss specific esoteric images connected to the Himalayas, but we will also show how in some instances imagination led to action. The esoteric powers of the Himalayas, often explored indirectly (e.g. as an object of meditation, vision or astral journey), also inspired actual travels in search of superhuman powers, miraculous places or the answers to metaphysical questions. The tremendous Himalayas, like everything sacred, are simultaneously fascinating, mysterious and frightening at times.

The first part of the paper focuses on the different esoteric discourses connected to visions of the mountains – from the

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<sup>11</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 62–69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 26–33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 15–22.

perspective of the studies on Western esotericism.<sup>15</sup> This part shows examples of how the Himalayas were seen and how they were imagined, as well as discussing some of its hidden attributes and qualities. The second part deals with the physical explorations of the Himalayas which were undertaken (sometimes covertly) for esoteric reasons. As the sources related to those issues are very rich and diverse, we have selected a few ideas and their realizations to focus on. Several groups of images can be distinguished based on the sources. One relates to persons (wise men, spiritual guides) to be found there, another to powers which can be drawn from the mountains, and a third to miraculous places hidden in the mountains. Esoteric imagination was most excited by ideas which connected those three areas, such as the many variants of the myth of Shambhala.

## Part I: Religious and Esoteric Imaginary of the Himalayas

### Eastern Masters of Wisdom

One of the most popular and therefore influential currents in Western esotericism, whose teachings and masters are connected to the realm of the Himalayas, is the Theosophical Society. Co-established in New York in 1875 by its charismatic yet unofficial leader – Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) – it drew its syncretic teachings from various cultures and religions. The core of the teaching, though, came from the Wisdom Masters – whom Blavatsky was supposed to have met during her visit in Tibet. Two of them (later known as Mahatmas) who were first introduced to the West, were Masters M. and K.H.,

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. A. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 1994 and W.J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012. For a Polish perspective on the research in this field see K.M. Hess, *Zachodni ezoteryzm jako obszar badań akademickich – zakres, problematyka, perspektywa polska* [in:] *Światło i ciemność. t. 7: Polskie studia ezoteryczne, Konteksty*, red. M. Rzezycka, I. Trzcińska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk 2015, pp. 11–38.

that is Morya and Koot Hoomi. She mentioned them often, and she attributed the teaching included in her books to the Adepts. In her letter to Franz Hartmann (1838–1912), she wrote:

There is beyond the Himalayas a nucleus of Adepts, of various nationalities; and the Teshu Lâma knows Them, and They act together, and some of Them are with Him and yet remain unknown in Their true character even to the average lamas – who are ignorant fools mostly. My Master and K.H. and several others I know personally are there, coming and going, and They are all in communication with Adepts in Egypt and Syria, and even Europe. I said and I proved that They could perform marvelous phenomena; but I also said that it was rarely They would condescend to do so to satisfy enquirers...<sup>16</sup>

The teachings were believed to come from the Masters to a small group of Theosophists in the form of letters and notes – so called Mahatma Letters. They were received from 1870 until 1900, that is nine years after Blavatsky's death.<sup>17</sup> The last letter was received by Annie Besant (1847–1933) and signed by Master K.H. The Mahatmas were a very important element of the functioning of the Theosophical Society especially in its first decade, even despite serious allegations that the letters were forged, and they are still an important part of modern Theosophy. The Masters from the Far East played a great role in the early Theosophical imagination. In "The Occult World", a Theosophical magazine, there is a passage written by its editors mentioning a great desire to be put into communication

<sup>16</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *Letter to Dr. Hartmann, April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1886* (fragments) [in:] *Echoes from the past*, „The Theosophist” 1907, Vol. 29, no.1, p. 77. More on Mahatmas – see e.g. *eadem*, *The Theosophical Mahatmas*, "Path" 1886, Vol. 1, No. 9, pp. 257–263. The paper is a response to some of the statements from "The Occult World", journal ed. by J. Cables (President of the TS in Rochester) and W.T. Brown. S. Cranston, who commented on a short part of the cited fragment and added '[Panchen]' before Lama, see S. Cranston, *The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement*, Path Pub. House, New York 1993, p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> C. Jinarâjadâsa, *The Story of Mahatma Letters*, Adyar 1946, pp. 1–6.

with the Theosophical Mahatmas, although the authors came to the conclusion that it was useless to strain the psychical eyes toward the Himalayas to do so. Blavatsky commented on this negatively,<sup>18</sup> praising the Mahatmas, and stating that after eleven years of the existence of the Theosophical Society, the progress of its adepts was very disappointing.

Among the Mahatmas, it was Master Morya in particular who later played a great role in connecting the Wisdom teachings and the visions of the Himalayas. A pair of renowned Theosophists – Elena and Nikolai Roerich – claimed to be in contact with him.<sup>19</sup> In a diary entry of one of their disciples, Sina Fosdick (from October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1928) we learn that M.M. was designated as the next Lord of Shambhala,<sup>20</sup> the land believed to be in the heart of the Himalayas, which we will discuss in details below. Although it is worth noting that it was Helena P. Blavatsky who was the reason for the popularity of the myth of Shambhala in the West in late 19<sup>th</sup> century – she introduced it in *The Secret Doctrine* and several other works.<sup>21</sup>

Besides Theosophy there were many currents and teachers who perceived the Himalayas as the place of origin or storage of ancient Wisdom. Among them an interesting example is a German poet, painter, and spiritual teacher named Joseph Anton Schneiderfranken (1876–1943), widely known as Bô Yin Râ. His small brochure entitled *The Light from Himavat*<sup>22</sup> became very popular in many Esoteric milieus; Bô Yin Râ also made a painting with the same title.

<sup>18</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Mahatmas...*, pp. 257–263.

<sup>19</sup> It is widely known that Elena was believed to have contacted M.M., but from the diaries of Roerichs' disciple, Sina Fosdick, we learn that both of them claimed to talk to him, see S. Fosdick, *My Teachers. Meetings with the Roerichs. Diary Leaves 1922–1934*, Ashland 2015.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 297.

<sup>21</sup> For the meaning of Shambhala in Theosophy (*S'ambhala*, *Sambhala*, *Shambhala*, *Śambhala*) and list of the Theosophical sources referring to it, see H.P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary*, London–New York–Adyar 1892, p. 287 and *Colloation of Theosophical Glossaries* (S–Sam), <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/ctg/s-sam.htm> [accessed: 13.03.2016].

<sup>22</sup> See the chapter *Światło Himavatu* [in:] Bô Yin Râ, *Księga Sztuki Królewskiej. Podręcznik białej magii*, Tow. Ignis, Łódź–Katowice–Warszawa 1923.

Considering that both the Theosophical Society founders and Bô Yin Râ were born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one might suppose that the visions of the spiritual masters originating in the Himalayas are long gone beliefs that belong to a time, when the area had not been as explored as it is today. This would be a mistake. One contemporary example of a group whose beliefs include this motif is the Federation of spiritual communities – Damanhur, whose roots date back to 1975. The founding of the group was inspired by its leader, Falco Tarassaco (né Oberto Airaudi 1950–2013). The most recognizable feature of the group is its worldwide-known subterranean cathedral – an extraordinary complex of caves known as the Temples of Humankind that are located in the foothills of the Alps in northern Italy. There is no place here to elaborate on the beliefs of the Damanhurians, but we may note that they believe that in the Himalayas dwell the so-called “Lords of Karma” – spiritual entities able to change Karma. Their powers are connected to the lines of energy that can be found in the mountains, which shall be described below.

### Places of Power

Beside the visions of the Himalayas as a place of residence for spiritual teachers, there are also many examples of conceptualizing the mountains themselves as a mighty place of power. There is a huge variety among such visions so the focus here will be on two examples. They were chosen because of the variety of discourses that they can be found in.

The first example comes from writings of George Arundale, a prominent esotericist, and a member of the Theosophical Society. The text we are focusing on was published in the 1930s and describes a journey to the Himalayas and to its highest point – Mount Everest. The intriguing feature of this trip, however, is that it is a journey through meditation. Even though the part devoted to the mountain is relatively short in comparison to other writings published together with it, the whole volume’s title is *Mount Everest. Its Spiritual Attainment*.<sup>23</sup> As we pointed

<sup>23</sup> G. Arundale, *Mount Everest. Its Spiritual Attainment*, Theosophical Press, Wheaton 1933.

out, the journey is not physical, and neither is its aim. The Himalayas are seen as a medium for the initiation where one can reach the highest parts of the inner self. The text of Mount Everest is one of the Theosophical works that focuses on the places of power that can be found around the world:<sup>24</sup>

There are international, world-wide places of spiritual magnificence which have tremendous meaning, and they are used as great spiritual centers for spiritual activity. The greatest of these is Kailasa, Mount Everest. There is no more splendid majesty than that highest mountain in the world with its extraordinary wonderful attendant mountain ranges. [...] Mt. Everest is used for Transfiguration. It is used for semiphysical experiences as to the unity of all life [...].<sup>25</sup>

During the journey that the reader embarks on with Arundale, he reaches the summit of the mountain. Powerful spiritual forces are at work there, running through both the mountain and the man. What is interesting, the currents of the energy described come from two sources, in two ways:

All the while around you are moving the great forces of nature in tremendous surgings. Right up through Mt. Everest comes surging the great power of earth; right down from our Father Sun Himself comes streaming the great power of life; and both meet, as it were, in you.<sup>26</sup>

A very different narrative about the Himalayas as a place of power comes from the above-mentioned Damanhur. The Damanhurians believe that the whole globe is full of a kind of energy stream called synchronic lines. As we learn from the publications of the founder, Falco Tarasacco, there are many varieties of such lines (major, minor, and others), and all their energy can be measured.

<sup>24</sup> For other examples see K. Chodkiewicz, *The Cracow Occult Centre*, London 1966, pp. 5–7, Ch.W. Leadbeater, *The Hidden Side of Things*, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar 1923, pp. 514–515, etc.

<sup>25</sup> G. Arundale, *Mount Everest...*, pp. 166–167.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172.



Some mountains for example in India, Tibet, Nepal (home of so many spiritual paths) are variable antennas and it is therefore interesting to note their influence on the surrounding area, especially when they are touched by Major Lines. Since Minor Lines that form in this area are [...] really numerous (they value amounts to 799, that we know of), these are places that are eminently suitable for many magic operations. [...] Along the Himalayas, the two Major Red lines, the Seventh and Eight, meet each other no less than seven times creating as many Minor lines, value of 12 green. Also two Red and one Blue, forming a White with a value of 48, plus two Blue and one Red forming a Golden 182, two Blue and two Red which give a Shining value of 365 and also a Red and a Blue (at least five times) constituting a purple 24.<sup>27</sup>

Places on the crossings of those lines are spots where magical tools (drawings, pentacles, magical spirals) can be produced that can predetermine rebirths and influence the world over distances of centuries and millennia.<sup>28</sup> The community has syncretic beliefs, but it is very significant that they use language that sounds like scientific jargon, although from what it implies, it is basically an occult science.

The two selected narratives about the Himalayas focusing on power, also differ in the vision of the manner that the power flows: one is horizontal, and the other one – vertical. After presenting the Himalayas as a place of residence of spiritual masters, and energy flow, let us move to their third spiritual dimension – the hidden realms of power.

### A Hidden Spiritual Realm: the Myth of Shambhala

According to Hindu Mythology, Shambhala was a hidden domain of spiritual perfection, where Kalkin – the last Avatar of the god Vishnu – is expected to be born at the end of Kali-Yuga, the

<sup>27</sup> F. Tarassaco, *The Synchronic Lines. The Energy streams of planet Earth*, Devodama, Vidracco 2015, p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

Age of Vice.<sup>29</sup> However, the myth of Shambhala became famous through the Tibetan tradition of Kalachakra Vajrayana Buddhism (the prophecy was mentioned in the 10<sup>th</sup> century for the first time.)<sup>30</sup> This legendary kingdom belongs to both the material and spiritual world and is hidden among the ice-covered mountains of the Himalayas. Only those who have developed a unique spiritual power in themselves are able to cross its gates.<sup>31</sup>

The territory of Shambhala is round and has a structure similar to the Tibetan Mandala (according to the myth, the art of making colourful sand diagrams reflecting the traditional cosmology originated there) – it consists of eight regions divided into twelve principalities.<sup>32</sup>

According to ancient Tibetan tradition, the Himalayan Kingdom takes the form of an eight-petal lotus. Rare wanderers who reach it become overwhelmed by the beauty of its countless lakes, meadows and forests. Its magnificent capital of Kalapa, full of breathtaking palaces made of jewels, is located in the middle of the legendary kingdom. Its inhabitants do not know poverty, illness, hunger, or death. Shambhala is a domain of harmony, beauty and wisdom; Buddhism exists here in its purest form, which enables everyone to achieve enlightenment.<sup>33</sup>

The journey to this Himalayan realm is a quest for spiritual perfection. The road to the ancient domain leads through a mastery of the inner forces. An old Buddhist parable tells of a dialogue between a Tibetan monk and a young adventurer: “Where are you going across the wastes of snow”, a lama hermit asked a youth who embarked on a long journey to find a wondrous Shambhala land. “To find Shambhala” answered the boy. “Ah, well then, you need not travel far. The kingdom of Shambhala is in your own heart.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Śambala* [in:] *Leksykon. Zaświaty i krainy mityczne*, red. M. Sacha-Piekło, Znak, Kraków 1999, pp. 215–216.

<sup>30</sup> A. Znamenski, *Red Shambhala. Magic, Prophecy, and Geopolitics in the Heart of Asia*, Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton–Chennai 2011, pp. 1–3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> See *Śambala*, pp. 215–216.

<sup>33</sup> See A. Znamenski, *Red Shambhala...*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>34</sup> See *Shambhala* [in:] *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. J. Bowker, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, p. 885.

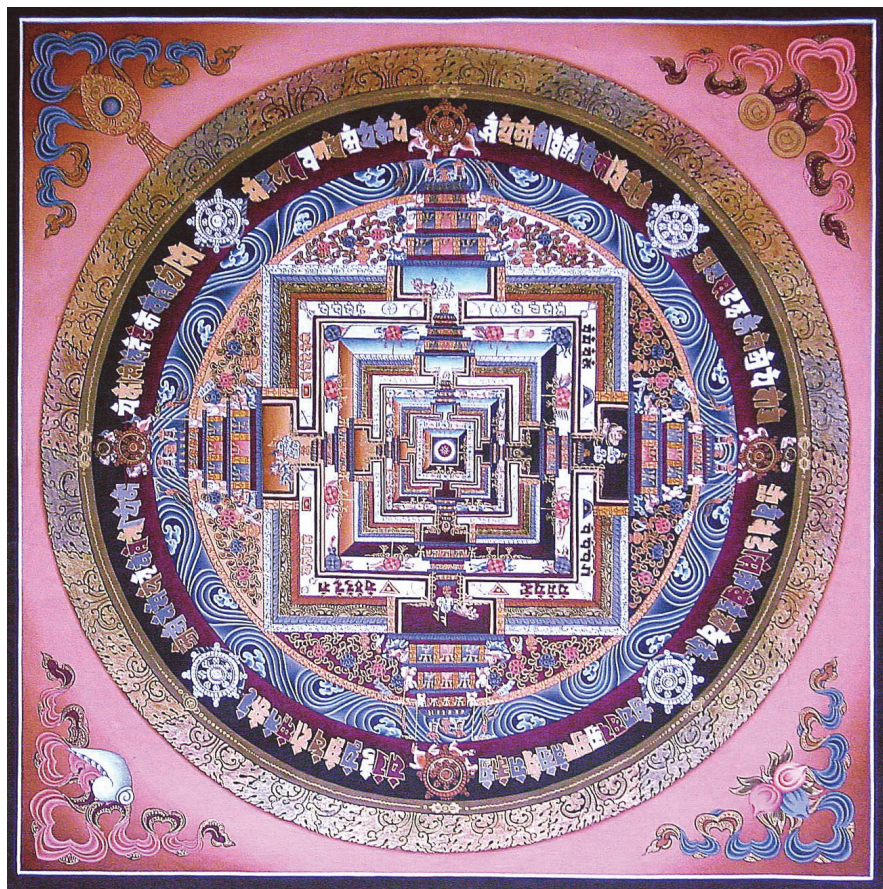


Fig. 1. Kalachakra thangka painted in Sera Monastery, Tibet.  
Photo by Kosi Gramatikoff



However, the Shambhala myth also had its eschatological aspect, connected with the resistance of Buddhist communities against invaders. According to an ancient Tibetan prophecy, one day an army of daemons from the outside will overrun Tibet, wreaking havoc and bringing suffering. The world will enter the Age of Darkness. Mankind will forget the message of Siddhartha Gautama completely. However, Buddhism will survive in the Kingdom of Shambhala. King Rudra Chakrin (Ridgen Djapo) will lead his mighty army against the demonic oppressors for the final battle between good and evil and liberate humanity. After the final battle, the evil forces will be vanquished and true Buddhism shall rule the world.<sup>35</sup>

### Shambhala in Agni Yoga Teachings

The Myth of the Shambhala – the hidden Himalayan Kingdom – is one of the most important themes of the esoteric philosophy of Agni Yoga created by Russian esoteric thinkers Elena and Nikolai Roerich. They perceived this Himalayan domain as an apogee of spiritual perfection, a hidden jewel of the Universe, an emanation of the highest level of beauty, wisdom and love. Shambhala became a central theme of Agni Yoga cosmology as a treasury of eternal wisdom and logos of cosmic evolution.

An outstanding artist Nikolai Roerich heard about Shambhala for the first time, when he was involved in the construction of St. Petersburg Buddhist temple under the guidance of Agvan Dordzhiev. Elena and Nikolai Roerich were convinced that the material and spiritual worlds are inextricably intertwined. Thus, Shambhala is perceived as a symbol of Perfection, the spiritual realm, but in the same time, a place which exists in the material world, hidden in the Himalayas, accessible only to those who possess remarkable willpower and wisdom. The mysterious realm was not only a symbol or metaphor for them – they were convinced that Shambhala exists as a real place, and the direct experience of its precious treasures is possible through

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<sup>35</sup> See A. Znamenski, *Red Shambhala...*, pp. 3–4.

the wisdom of Tibetan Mahatmas.<sup>36</sup> The Teachings of Shambhala expressed the all-embracing mystery of life and its multitude of cosmic energies. The legendary kingdom was a symbol of the unity of diverse descriptions of the Universe and the oneness of different aspects of the ultimate truth.<sup>37</sup> The Era of Shambhala will bring the unity of spiritual, religious and scientific paradigms: “All our latest discoveries are regarded by the East as signs of the era of Shambhala. Milliken’s cosmic ray, Einstein’s relativity, Teremin’s music from the ether, are regarded in Asia as signs of the evolution of human consciousness, confirmed by Vedic and Buddhist traditions and the teachings of Shambhala.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the short stories written by Nikolai Roerich, *Shambhala, the Resplendent*, describes a fictional dialogue between two model characters: a traveller from the West, who dreams about being initiated into the mysteries of Kalachakra, and a Tibetan lama, who represents oriental wisdom. In the beginning, the Himalayan sage is skeptical and distrustful, but eventually decides to reveal the mystery of Shambhala.

Lama, tell me of Shambhala!

But you Westerners know nothing of Shambhala – you wish to know nothing. Probably you ask only out of curiosity; and you pronounce the sacred word in vain. Lama, I do not ask about Shambhala aimlessly. Everywhere, people know of this great symbol under different names. Our scientists seek each spark concerning this remarkable realm [...]. We sense how, under secret symbols, a great truth is concealed. Truly, the ardent scientist desires to know all about Kalachakra.<sup>39</sup>

The Tibetan Lama describes Shambhala as a realm which is very remote and impossible to describe with words, but in the same time accessible to those who open themselves to the light of its teaching.

<sup>36</sup> Those of Theosophical origin.

<sup>37</sup> See Л.В. Сапошникова, *Великое путешествие*, т. 1: *Мастер*, Международный Центр Рерихов, Москва 1999, p. 432.

<sup>38</sup> N. Roerich, *Shambhala*, Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York 1985, p. 297.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

## Western Reception of the Shambhala Myth: Agharta and Shangri-La

Two famous Western occult concepts strongly resemble the myth of Shambhala and are ostensibly directly influenced by it.

The first of them is the subterranean realm of Agartha, described by Joseph-Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1842–1910), occultist and philosopher who created the idea of the model of governance called “Synarchy”, based on a parallel between the human body and society.

According to the French author, Agharta is a mysterious underground kingdom and a vast storehouse of secret knowledge beneath the Himalayas and linked to other continents of the world by a gigantic network of passages. The location of these tunnels, and the gateways, are well-hidden and guarded, accessible only to those who have mastered the secret occult knowledge. The kingdom is inhabited by a wise race of supreme spiritual masters, who hid there at the beginning of Kali Yuga. According to d'Alveydre's book *The Mission of India*, Agartha radiates its wisdom to the whole of the world, although humanity often ignores its messages.<sup>40</sup>

Another example of the reception of Shambhala in Western culture is the tranquil valley of Shangri-La, a Himalayan utopia of eternal happiness, described by James Hilton in his book *Lost Horizon* published in 1933. The land of Shangri-La, isolated from the outside world, is inhabited by almost immortal people who possess the ancient wisdom. The resemblance of the fictional land to the mythical Shambhala seems quite obvious.

## Part II: Imagination in Action – Journeys to Hidden Himalayan Domains

In early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the legend of Shambhala [and the complex esoteric dimensions of the spiritual centre hidden in the Himalayas] was immensely popular among the political elites

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<sup>40</sup> A. Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, *The Kingdom of Agartha: A Journey into the Hollow Earth*, University of Rochester Press, New York 1995.

of world power. This was not only the result of a widespread mystic and spiritualist worldview, but there was also a geopolitical reason. The Himalayas were an important strategic point – a powerful natural barrier between the crumbling Qing Chinese Empire and British-controlled India. The Himalayan kingdom of Tibet, which was only *de iure* controlled by Manchu Chinese rulers and *de facto* independent, became crucial in the Great Game of the world great powers for the domination over Asia. Some rulers and their advisers thought that ancient Tibetan myth may be used instrumentally in the struggle for control over the Himalaya, while some actually believed that it is possible to unleash the hidden power of the mythical domain.

The Great Game, in which Great Britain, Russia and Japan were the most prominent players, was above all a clash of intelligence offices and secret services. The members of secret societies and different occult traditions played a major role in the struggle for domination over Asia. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, travellers working for intelligence services of different world powers embarked on a journey to find the hidden Himalayan lands.

### Russia and the Soviet Union

Among the first proponents of the annexation of Tibet by the Russian Empire were Buryat Petr Badmaev, the personal healer of tsar Alexander III,<sup>41</sup> and Prince Esper Esperovich Ukhtomsky, diplomat, orientalist, Buddhist and close friend of Tsar Nicholas II, whom he perceived as a potential liberator of Eastern nations from the yoke of West European powers. According to Ukhtomsky, the Russian tsar had to play the role of Rudra Chakrin, while Russia was an equivalent of the mythical Shambhala.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See П. Бадмаев, *О задачах русской политики на азиатском востоке*, Санкт-Петербург 1893; Б. Гусев, *Доктор Бадмаев*, Русская книга, Москва 1995.

<sup>42</sup> See M. Osterrieder, *From Synarchy to Shambhala: The Role of Political Occultism and Social Messianism in the Activities of Nicholas Roerich* [in:] B. Mentzel, M. Hagemeister, B.G. Rosenthal, *The New Age of Russia. Occult and esoteric Dimensions*, Sagner, München–Berlin 2011, p. 108.



After the October Revolution, the newly-created Soviet state continued the Russian geopolitical mission of expansion in Asia. The leaders in the Kremlin perceived the Himalayas and Central Asia as territories with an immense geopolitical role. What is more, contrary to widespread belief about the orthodox materialistic outlook of the Soviet elite, a large part of it was deeply interested in occult science.<sup>43</sup>

One of the first Soviet adventurers who planned to search for Shambhala in the Himalayas and unleash its hidden powers and secret wisdom for the sake of Soviet science and defence capability was Aleksandr Barchenko, the occultist and researcher of secret brain powers, telepathy, telekinesis, hypnosis and another paranormal phenomena, who worked for the OGPU secret service, supported by influential officer Gleb Bokii. He perceived finding Shambhala as a main goal in his life. Barchenko tried to convince his protectors that ancient, forgotten civilizations possessed powerful knowledge, which could be useful for the Soviet state. His idea of leading a scientific mission to the Himalayas in search of Shambhala was supported by OGPU chairman Feliks Dzierzynski, but was hindered by the enemies of Gleb Bokii within the OGPU and the sceptical Soviet Foreign Commissar Georgii Chicherin.<sup>44</sup>

At that time, the notion of Soviet Russia as Red Shambhala started to gain popularity among Buddhists in Asia. The ideas of a communist brotherhood of men corresponded to the egalitarian doctrines of Buddhism. Nikolay Roerich was a great supporter of the unification of Communism and Buddhism. An émigré living in the United States at that time, during his visit to Moscow in 1926 he managed to convince some prominent members of the Soviet leadership (including his former schoolmate and chairmen of the OGPU secret service Vyacheslav Menzhinski, a high-ranking secret service officer and occultist Gleb Bokii, and People Commissar of Culture Anatolii Lunacharski) to financially support his great Himalayan journey.

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<sup>43</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> See A. Znamenski, *Red Shambhala...*, pp. 50–66.

The great Asian expedition had many different objectives. Some of them were purely scientific – they included the cultural and geographical research of the Himalayas. However, finding the hidden realm of Shambhala was the most important goal of the expedition. The one who supposedly ordered it was the spiritual teacher, Mahatma Morya, a spiritual entity who telepathically communicated with Elena Roerich. The Himalayan journey of Nikolai Roerich was not only a spiritual quest and a scientific expedition, but also a political and diplomatic mission – an attempt to deliver a secret message from the Soviet government to Dalai Lama XIII.

Elena and Nikolai Roerich were arguably the most famous Russian travellers, who embarked on a quest in order to find the Kingdom of Shambhala among the Himalayas. They ultimately did not, however, achieve the main goal of this Central Asian journey of 1925–1928. The expedition was halted by the Tibetan authorities, prevented from entering Lhasa and detained. Since it was impossible to leave Tibet, the travellers were forced to live in tents for five months in sub-zero conditions.

The person responsible for preventing the Russian expedition from entering Lhasa was an influential British intelligence officer Frederick Bailey, who suspected Roerich of working for Soviet intelligence (among the people who were consulted on this issue by British MI6 was the famous British occultist Aleister Crowley). After five months of detention in conditions of extreme cold, the Russian expedition was allowed to leave Tibet and enter British-controlled Sikkim.

Nikolai Roerich was active in public life. He often supported various peace initiatives. However, he never joined any political camp. He was a dedicated champion of peace, tolerance and social justice, but it would be a mistake to connect him with any particular ideology. Nevertheless, through his undertaking of the quest for Shambhala, he became involved in the geopolitical struggle for the Himalayas.

Russian independent researcher Oleg Shishkin claims that Nikolai Roerich was an OGPU/NKVD agent conducting secret

missions in Asia.<sup>45</sup> According to Vladimir Rosov and Andrei Znamenski, his real goal was to bring the “Great Plan” into reality – fulfilling the prophecy of Shambhala and creating a Pan-Asiatic Empire, based on a synthesis of Buddhism and Communism, in Tibet, Mongolia, India and China.<sup>46</sup>

Nicolay Roerich is particularly famous for his advocacy of culture and peace. The well-known international Roerich Peace Pact of 1935, which obligated nations to protect artefacts and institutions of culture, was also inspired by the Shambhala legend. As Nikolai Roerich said during a Congress of the Banner of Peace in 1933: “The East has said that when the Banner of Shambhala would encircle the world, verily the New Dawn would follow. Borrowing the Legend of Asia, let us determine that the Banner of Peace shall encircle the world, carrying its word of Light, and presaging a New Morning of human brotherhood.”<sup>47</sup>

### SS Expedition to Shambhala

The belief in the occult was widespread among the Nazi political elite, including prominent figures like Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Hess. Nazi occultists connected with secret societies like Thule and (allegedly existing) Vril Society were deeply interested in different mythical lands, like Hyperborea, Lemuria or Atlantis. Influenced by Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *The Coming Race*, some of them believed that different gates leading into the centre of the hollow Earth, inhabited by the supernatural beings of Vril-ya, exist in different inhospitable parts of the Earth. The mythical Shambhala was believed by them to be one such entrance. The interest in Eastern myths was inspired by influential German geographer, general, orientalist and occultist Karl Haushofer, who was the main proponent of

<sup>45</sup> See О. Шишкин, *Битва за Гималаи. НКВД, магия и шпионаж*, ОЛМА-ПРЕСС, Москва 1999.

<sup>46</sup> See В. Росов, *Русско-американские экспедиции Н.К. Рериха в Центральную Азию (1920-е и 1930-е годы)*, [http://lebendige-ethik.net/Avtoreferat\\_Rosov.pdf](http://lebendige-ethik.net/Avtoreferat_Rosov.pdf) [accessed: 15.10.2016]; A. Znamenski, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> *The Roerich Pact and Banner of Peace*, Kessinger Publishing, New York 2006.

the Nazi-Japanese alliance. He was also an ardent proponent of the esoteric-motivated research of the Himalayas in order to find and unleash the hidden power of the supernatural.

A Nazi-occultist institute Ahnenerbe (the Bureau of Study of Ancestral Heritage) created in 1935 in order to research Germanic runes, the secret of the swastika and the power of Vril, with Wolfram von Sievers as its head and incorporated in 1937 into the SS by Heinrich Himmler, sent an expedition to the Himalayas between May 1938 and August 1939. The Nazi mission was invited by the Tibetan government to participate in their New Year (Losar) celebration. The leader of the five-people expedition was Ernst Schäfer, a famous German adventurer, explorer and biologist, who participated in two previous expeditions to Tibet in 1931–1932 and 1934–1936.<sup>48</sup> Another participant in the expedition was an anthropologist Bruno Beger, a Nazi race-science (Rassekunde) scholar, whose goal was to measure the physical features of the Tibetans and prove their supposedly Aryan and Hyperborean roots; a geologist Karl Weinert, a proponent of Welteislehre (the theory, according to which the eternal ice was the source of all existence), and two other travellers, a film operator and a technician. The main objective of the expedition was to create a complete scientific record of Tibet (including landforms, climate, and culture), but also to establish political and military ties with Tibet. The expedition also had goals connected with gathering intelligence data.

Many goals of the expeditions were connected with the occult sphere or alternative science – research into the supposed Hyperborean genesis of the Tibetan people, proving the theory of eternal ice to be correct, mastering the ancient power of Vril, investigation of funeral dances and the Tibetan death cult aspect of the pre-Buddhist Bon religion.

Nazi scholars entered the Tibetan cities of Lhasa and Shigatse and gathered sacred Buddhist texts, Tibetan Swastikas, pieces of Mandala art, and other artefacts and documents, which were later kept in the Ahnenerbe archive. They also brought

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<sup>48</sup> A. Berzin, *The Nazi Connection between Shambhala and Tibet*, <https://study-buddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/history-culture/shambhala/the-nazi-connection-with-shambhala-and-tibet> [accessed: 10.10.2017].

gifts from Tibet's regent for Adolf Hitler and were allowed to document their research on film.

After their return to Berlin, the members of the expedition were greeted as national heroes. Ernst Schäfer was awarded with highly prestigious *Totenkopf*-ring and a precious SS knife by Himmler.

### Japan and Shambhala

The Himalayas were a subject of interest for two far-right occult secret societies, which influenced the politics of the militarist Empire of Japan: the Dark Ocean Society (Genyosha), founded in 1881 by ex-samurai Hiraoka Kotaro, and the Black Dragon Society (Kokuryukai), founded in 1901 by Uchida Ryohei, the ultimate goal of which was the creation of a Pan-Asian empire ruled from Tokyo. Both organizations had a secretive, initiatory character and strove towards removing Western and Russian influences from Asia. Their ideologies were based on eschatological interpretations of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs, with imperial Japan perceived as fulfilling the sacred mission of liberating Asia. The network created by both organizations existed in the whole of Asia and was used by Japanese militarist circles for espionage, sabotage and assassination.<sup>49</sup>

The Shambhala myth was used by Pan-Asian secret societies as a weapon in propaganda warfare, in order to incite a pro-Japanese and anti-British revolt in Tibet from 1918 to 1922.

After the Japanese annexation of Chinese Manchuria in 1932 and the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo, Imperial Japan started to use the Shambhala myth in its propaganda of Pan-Asian ideas. Some Tibetans and Mongols from Chinese Inner Mongolia (part of which was included within Manchukuo) perceived Japan as the promised Shambhala – the Empire of the Rising Sun that would liberate the Buddhist nations from the Chinese and Western yoke.

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<sup>49</sup> A. Berzin, *The Role of Shambhala Legend in Russian and Japanese Involvement in pre-Communist Tibet*, [https://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/sociopolitica/sociopol\\_shambahla02.htm](https://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/sociopolitica/sociopol_shambahla02.htm) [accessed: 10.06.2017].

After the outbreak of the full-scale Sino-Japanese war of 1937, Japanese intelligence activities in Himalayas intensified, and occult societies were widely used by the imperial secret police Kempeitai. Japan collaborated with Mongol clergy in occupied Inner Mongolia, using the Shambhala legend to win the support of the Mongols for their future planned invasion against Outer Mongolia and Soviet Siberia.<sup>50</sup>

In May of 1939, a Japanese spy Jinzo Nomoto visited Tibet in the disguise of a Buddhist monk (at that time, the Tibetan government was actively exploring the possibility of asking Japan for protection). He spent 18 months there and gathered intelligence not only about the political life of Tibet, but also the ancient powerful legends of the Himalayas.

Japan returned to its plan of including Tibet into their sphere of influence after the invasion of Burma in 1942, but failed to implement their plans.<sup>51</sup>

### Ossendowski's Travel

One of the most controversial occult travels to Tibet was the journey of Ferdynand Ossendowski, one of the most famous Polish adventurers and writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the October Revolution, he claimed to have fled from Bolshevik-controlled Siberia to Mongolia and Tibet, where he supposedly met Buddhist lama Tushegoun who told him the legend of the mysterious, subterranean Kingdom of Agharthi hidden in the Himalayas, ruled by the most powerful king in the world. He described it in his best-selling novel *Beast, Men and Gods*:

The kingdom is called Agharti. It extends throughout all the subterranean passages of the whole world... These subterranean peoples and spaces are governed by rulers owing allegiance to the 'King of the World'... You know that in the two greatest oceans of the east and the west there were formerly two continents. They disappeared under the water but their

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<sup>50</sup> A. Berzin, *The Nazi Connection between Shambhala and Tibet...*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

people went into the subterranean kingdom. In underground caves there exists a peculiar light which affords growth to the grains and vegetables and long life without disease to the people.<sup>52</sup>

However, Ossendowski's travel tales are hardly credible. Swedish geographer and Tibetologist Sven Hedin pointed out too many critical mistakes in Ossendowski's most famous work and dismissed his reports as completely unbelievable. He even moved so far as to undermine the credibility of the fact that the Polish traveller had ever visited Tibet at all (the description of the Himalayas and Tibet from *Men, Beasts, and Gods* has nothing in common with reality). Probably that is why many perceive Ossendowski as a Polish version of Baron Münchhausen – a talented and influential crook who, however, inspired many of his readers.

### Conclusion

In this paper we presented selected visions of the Himalayas which had esoteric origins or elements. The highest mountains in the world gave impulse to many religious and esoteric doctrines. Among them we can find visions that perceive the Himalayas as a realm of Ancient Wisdom, teachers, masters, and various spiritual beings. They are seen as a place where a strong force flows, which may be used for spiritual works. It is also an inaccessible place where the spiritual realms are hidden. The Himalayas are believed to be possible to explore in both physical and non-physical ways to achieve spiritual perfection.

Beside this spiritual, self-improving aim – but based on the same sources – the Himalayas became a target for explorations whose aims, in most cases unofficial, were to gain actual occult power that could be used for political purposes. The expeditions for the search of Shambhala, believed to be a location in the physical world, hiding powerful resources, were conducted by the most powerful countries in the world.

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<sup>52</sup> A. Maclellan, *The Lost World of Agharti, The Mystery of Vril Power*, Corgi, London 1982, p. 66.

The examples discussed here show how strongly esoteric ideas can influence the imagination and how, and on what scale, the esoteric imagination can lead to action.

Karolina Maria Hess, Przemysław Sieradzan

### Explorations of the Esoteric Dreams of the Himalayas

The Himalayas – perceived as both a geographical and spiritual space – became a remarkable source of inspiration for many generations of esoteric thinkers, as well as a tempting travel destination for adventurous individuals searching for new dimensions of occult knowledge. The ancient Buddhist myth of Shambhala was re-thought in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, influencing esoteric doctrines and inspiring dreams about finding the (physical and spiritual) ways to this hidden domain. The paper presents chosen attempts to conceptualize the Himalayas as a mystic space as well as a place of esoterically-inspired excursions. Among many esoteric currents focused on Eastern myths, Theosophy plays a crucial role in the transmission of the Himalayan dream to Western culture as it appears in early writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Russian artist and thinker Nikolai Roerich gained particular prominence as an explorer of various dimensions of the Himalayan myth; the mountains were also an important theme in his paintings. Shambhala legends inspired some notable political figures participating in the so-called “Great Game” of world powers for the control over Asia to support and organize expeditions to Tibet in order to gain control over this mysterious land. The aim of the paper is to analyze various aspects of perception of the Himalayas through esoteric imagination.